

Central Intelligence Agency

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File

## DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Afghan Air Force: Crippling Impact of Pilot Shortages [REDACTED]

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SUMMARY

The shortage of dedicated, competent pilots has severely limited Afghan Air Force effectiveness and restricted needed growth and improvements in the aircraft inventory. The regime's widespread unpopularity--resulting in numerous defections, counterproductive security measures, and declining morale--is the primary factor limiting the size of the pilot force, although advances in insurgent air defense capabilities contribute to the loss of pilots. Kabul has been unable to build a viable cadre of qualified pilots despite a program of increased training and incentives. The impending withdrawal of Soviet Air units will exacerbate the problem of crumbling morale among Afghan pilots and will contribute to the regime's hasty collapse. [REDACTED]

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Shortage of Pilots Undermines Air Force Effectiveness

The Afghan Air Force cannot employ its aircraft to their full capability because of a shortage of qualified pilots. The Air Force, which we estimate has only 300 pilots to operate 250-330 aircraft,\* falls well short of the minimum ratio of 1.4 to 1.5 pilots per aircraft--double this ratio for transports and helicopters--considered the international norm to combination of transports and helicopters--require a crew of two pilots. [REDACTED]

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\* In addition to the 250-330 operational aircraft, the Afghans also have more than 50 non-operational MIG-15/17 FAGOT/FRESCO fighter aircraft in workable condition that have been placed in open storage. [REDACTED]

This memorandum was prepared by [REDACTED] South Asia Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to Chief, South Asia Division [REDACTED]

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The pilot shortage has restricted the number of missions flown by the Air Force, in our judgment. There are not enough pilots to support large-scale ground offensives with sustained airstrikes and airlift flights. The shortage has forced the regime to limit or cancel many routine bombing and transport missions. The lack of pilots to fly resupply flights also has contributed to the abandonment of many isolated government garrisons, such as Ali Kheyl in Paktia Province. The Air Force's ability to conduct airstrikes against insurgent supply caravans is sporadic at best and heliborne assaults are almost nonexistent. [redacted]

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- a The senior leadership ranks of the Air Force have remained small and ineffective largely due to the pilot shortage. The regime is unable to fill all the senior positions--such as squadron commander and instructor pilot--with older and experienced pilots. Soviet military advisers have had to perform many of the senior staff functions such as coordinating and prioritizing missions, scheduling pilots, and other day-to-day operational functions. We believe most of the capable Afghan pilots--qualified to hold command positions--often must neglect their staff duties to fly the missions too difficult for the less experienced junior pilots. [redacted]

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#### Widespread Unreliability and Incompetence Compounds Pilot Shortage

The overall shortage of qualified pilots is exacerbated by the lack of personnel considered politically reliable. Many fighter pilots who secretly sympathize with the resistance probably intentionally miss their assigned targets [redacted] and some pilots have committed acts of sabotage. Dissident Air Force officers a few years ago blew up approximately 20 government fighter aircraft parked at Shindand Airbase resulting in the single largest loss of Afghan aircraft in the war. Many pilots probably have collaborated with the resistance by providing intelligence and other forms of assistance. [redacted]

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Limited technical expertise within the pilot corps has restricted the Air Force's ability to carry out difficult missions. Many Afghan pilots are not proficient at all-weather or night flying and have difficulty with even standard flight procedures such as takeoffs and landings. Afghan fighter pilots generally lack the competence to simultaneously operate the aircraft's controls while attempting to visually detect and attack elusive insurgent positions. Limited technical expertise--such as poor navigational skills--among the pilot corps probably has reduced the effectiveness of many pre-planned strike missions. [redacted]

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[redacted] the inexperienced Afghan pilot force has had a very high accident rate. Afghan pilot errors probably are higher than for pilots from other third world countries because Afghan pilots--mostly young and inexperienced--are forced to fly under extremely stressful wartime conditions. The Afghan Air Force has been caught in a

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vicious circle of high pilot casualties from accidents that require continuing replacements--newer pilots with even less experience--resulting in still more pilot-induced crashes. [REDACTED]

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The insurgents' acquisition of improved antiaircraft weapons--particularly the Stinger surface-to-air missile (SAM) in September 1986--have increased dramatically the difficulties placed upon the regime's young and inexperienced pilots. The Afghan Air Force probably experienced its highest pilot casualty rate of the war in the first year following the Stinger's introduction. \*\* Few Afghan pilots are capable of effectively flying the more difficult procedures required to counter SAMs. Fighter pilots have therefore been forced to deliver their ordnance from higher altitudes to avoid the Stinger's reach, and helicopter pilots have flown dangerously fast and low to the ground to stay under the missile's kill altitude. [REDACTED]

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#### Inventory Expansion and Improvements Slowed

Regime efforts to expand the Air Force's inventory into a force large enough to conduct an effective counterinsurgency have been impeded by the continuing shortage of pilots. The regime needs to more than double its current aircraft inventory to compensate for the withdrawal of 500 Soviet aircraft based in Afghanistan and the loss of support aircraft flying from the USSR. Although the Soviets probably would like to significantly expand the Afghan Air Force, we believe Moscow will not deliver additional aircraft--other than replacements--unless the Afghans have enough pilots to fly them. [REDACTED]

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The dearth of skilled pilots also has slowed the Air Force's transition into more sophisticated aircraft, which apparently have proved too difficult and complicated for the Afghans to fly. For instance, the introduction of SU-22 FITTER J variable-geometry ground attack aircraft several years ago led to numerous accidental crashes by pilots not accustomed to swing-wing aircraft. The Afghans reverted to the older, more reliable, and simpler to fly SU-7 FITTER A as their primary ground attack plane and allowed the SU-22 FITTER J inventory to dwindle from attrition. Kabul currently possesses over 50 of the SU-7 FITTER As. [REDACTED]

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\*\* Despite the many insurgent shootdowns since the introduction of the Stingers, high aircraft losses have not had the same degrading impact upon the Afghan inventory as pilot shortages. The Afghans have used the higher aircraft attrition caused by SAMs to improve their inventory by replacing older aircraft--near the end of their useful service life--with newer models. [REDACTED]

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We believe the Soviets have resisted providing the regime with newer generation aircraft out of fear that politically unreliable pilots would defect with their aircraft. Moscow temporarily discontinued most helicopter shipments to the Afghans in 1985 following the defection of two pilots with MI-24 Hind attack helicopters to Pakistan. The number of Afghan helicopters dropped significantly from lack of replacements until new deliveries began arriving in 1987.

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#### Unpopular Regime Keeps Pilot Force Small

Numerous defections--resulting from the regime's unpopularity and the widespread sympathy for the resistance--account for much of the pilot attrition. Many older, experienced pilots--who would have constituted the core of the pilot force--defected to the insurgents or fled the country following the Soviet invasion in 1979. The majority of them escaped without their aircraft because of the tight security measures practiced by Ministry of State Security personnel to protect regime aircraft. Only seven defections to Pakistan with aircraft have been successful since the beginning of the Soviet intervention.

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Kabul's extremely cautious security and recruiting practices--designed to weed out disloyal pilots--have bankrupted the quality and size of the pilot force. The regime probably believes overreactive measures are necessary to limit occurrences of sabotage and defections. The Air Force has purged many of its most capable pilots because of suspected sympathies with the resistance, in our judgement. Purges of Western-trained pilots also have been common. Infighting among the regime's Communist leaders probably has driven from the Air Force many experienced pilots who were suspected of supporting their particular faction over the government.

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Declining morale within the pilot ranks--caused by high air losses and the Soviet withdrawal--also has contributed to the pilot shortage. The increased dangers from improved insurgent air defenses have prompted many pilots to seek safer ground jobs. An increasing number of pilots probably believe the regime will soon collapse and will seek less visible jobs to avoid the insurgents' anticipated revenge. The declining morale has reached the point that on several occasions many pilots have refused to fly, gone on strike, or rioted.

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The regime continues to implement futile steps to increase pilot retention and recruitment by offering increased incentives such as special privileges, salary raises, faster promotions, monetary bonuses, and honors. Although pilot benefits include purchases of scarce items from restricted government stores at reduced prices and higher pay than Army officers of the equal rank, the regime efforts have failed because they have not dealt with the underlying problems of regime unpopularity or improved insurgent air defense capability. A little more than a year ago the regime instituted Republican Air Force Day, a new holiday celebrating the Air Force, in a desperate attempt to boost sagging morale. [REDACTED]

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The pool of qualified pilot candidates from which Kabul can choose is limited. Most of the draft age men would prefer to fight the regime than join it, in our judgment. Many technically competent and educated Afghans--better able to master flying skills than the majority of poorly educated Afghans--fled the country following the Soviet invasion. Afghan women--barred by the regime from flight school--constitute the majority of Afghans currently enrolled in higher education programs. The stringent physical examinations designed to measure an individual's tolerance to stressful flying conditions further reduces the number of eligible pilot candidates. [REDACTED]

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#### Weaknesses in Training

Kabul cannot rapidly expand the Afghan pilot force through training, despite recent attempts to improve pilot training in Afghanistan. Pilot training programs are currently overburdened and capable of only maintaining the current size of the pilot force. Pilot training typically takes at least three years; basic classroom instruction in Russian language and technical subjects require at least a year before any actual flight training can begin. The students' inability to grasp the technical material has been the primary cause of a high failure rate, in our judgment. [REDACTED]

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Soviet and regime Air Force officials have recently taken steps to expand the training programs inside Afghanistan. New MIG-21 FISHBED trainers were introduced at Mazar-e Sharif several years ago, and two advanced SU-17 FITTER E trainers were more recently based at Bagram Airbase, possibly in an attempt to ease Afghan pilots back into swing-wing fighter aircraft. We believe many Afghan pilots, however, will continue to be sent to the Soviet Union for basic pilot training. [REDACTED]

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#### Outlook

We believe the Afghan pilot force will dramatically shrink in size immediately after the Soviet departure, which will contribute to the Afghan Air Force's speedy demise. Although the Afghan Air Force is not capable of

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preventing the eventual overthrow of the regime, we believe the regime is incapable of surviving much beyond the collapse of the Air Force. The already small corps of pilots--forced to shoulder the overwhelming burden of the air war--will incur higher pilot losses through the end of the war. Although the regime--with Soviet support--has been able to keep pilot combat losses and defections from climbing too high, the government's increasingly desperate military situation will force it to use airpower more aggressively, thereby increasing the vulnerability to shootdowns by insurgent air defense weapons. A sharp increase in aircrew casualties will reduce pilot morale still further and almost certainly lead to widespread resistance by pilots to flying missions they consider dangerous. Defections almost certainly will increase, although probably not in significant numbers until the regime nears collapse. At that time we believe many Afghan pilots are likely to fly their aircraft to the Soviet Union and Pakistan to avoid insurgent retribution. [redacted]

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